DISCUSSION PAPER

Violating a Home and its Surrounds: An Essay on Tribal Alienation

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The violation of homes has become a 'strategy for development' in India, and the world over. The alienation of people from their homes and surrounds is one way of violating their homes. But more recently the practice of totally dispossessing people of their homes is being seen as an 'acceptable' strategy.

In India it is sometimes called 'displacement', or 'dislocation', as if all it involves is a casual shift of location. The 'dislocated' people are contemptuously called 'oustees', who need to be 'rehabilitated' very much like alcoholics.

Of the various 'costs' that 'development' extracts from the poor people, this is perhaps the most barbaric. It is a tearing asunder of cultures and communities, a violation of fundamental rights, and an impoverishment and annihilation of a people and a way of life.

In the early days of independence the Indian public had hopes that these 'temporary' sacrifices of a 'few' would help build up a more just and harmonious nation. However, it is progressively becoming evident that the sacrifices are not of a few, certainly not temporary, and are a part of the injustices and disharmony that are growing in our country.

This paper attempts to examine two questions. First, what does dispossession do to a family, and to a community, especially among the tribals and the poor, who are the main sufferers.

Secondly, what justification does the State and the Society have to do this to its own people.

Violating a Home

What does a home mean to a tribal? To most of us it means a large number of things, constantly discovered, forgotten, and then remembered again. It is our space, where we have to seek no acceptance, where we can be ourselves. It is that space which we long for when we are away, to which we retreat when we feel threatened. It has memories, and associations. It encompasses our childhood, our changing perceptions of ourselves and of the world.

For tribals, who have few personal possessions, their home is their main possession. Even if they are respected nowhere else, in their home they have status, they are wanted, needed and loved. And it is at home that they feel as secure as they ever will.

Everything in the home is cherished, even if not in specificity, as a part of the home. It has, or soon acquires, an association, a value, and a function.

The notion of a home grows, and encompasses more and more. Perhaps for a child initially only the womb, and then the mother's lap, is a home. Slowly the child starts treating the room, then other rooms, the house, the compound, the locality, and even the village, the town, the country and the planet as a home. But all these grow around the core of one's own home, which is the centre of the extended home.

As the concept of home grows, so does concern for all it contains. The village is cherished, not just the house. The 'Core' home is located in its surrounds, a larger home, which includes the other houses, streets, markets, trees, wells, forests, hills, and lakes, all of which are cherished. All of which are "home".

It is sometimes suggested that one can replace 'cherish' by

'utility', or even 'duty'. That individuals and communities can be alienated from their homes, yet be taught to care for the resultant impersonal surrounds through a demonstration of the 'utility' to do so, or of their 'duty' towards society.

But when a 'cherished' object becomes an object of utility (a 'resource' ?), then different human faculties come into play. The concept of 'trade-offs' appears, and a 'utility' is evaluated against other utilities. A logic begins to operate and one makes decisions on how best to 'use' a resource, or to appropriate it. As there is no emotional, primordial content, short-term needs are satisfied, individuals maximizing their own utility by disregarding social interests, or long term implications.

The alienation from the surrounds also breaks the sense of continuity, of history, of a sense of belonging. People do not have faith any longer that they will be allowed to have continued access, or interaction, with their surrounds. They are suspicious, and uncertain, of the future. Prudence, and their experience, dictates that they maximise their 'utility' now, for some one else might take over before long.

Some years ago some of us were visiting a village in the north-east, hoping to understand a little of the interaction tribal communities have with their surrounds.

It was a poor village, and much of the population was subsisting by weaving baskets out of bamboo. The tribals had, over the years, been totally alienated from the forest and wilderness areas around them. The Forest Department had progressively exercised their presence and control over these areas, and what was earlier free access

for getting bamboos and grass, was now controlled through licenses, leases, and contractors.

Initially, the elders had continued to treat their surrounds as their own, despite the Governmental presence, and continued to cherish them. But, gradually, changes had occurred which, though painful, they were powerless to stop. Their own relationship had been rudely curtailed, and for sometime they were not even allowed to walk into some of the forests.

It had taken a local upheaval, and political action, to re-establish even minimal access: that of being able to collect bamboo and grass for their own use.

Many community structures had broken down in the face of this curtailed existence. The 'home' had suddenly shrunk, and made people feel resentful and suffocated.

Whereas traditionally the tribals themselves monitored the bamboo, and elders could often be seen, with some youngsters in tow, worriedly examining the bamboo groves, discussing at great length, and sometimes heatedly, how much bamboo could be taken out without hurting the grove, today the effort was to extract as much as possible.

The village had to, in the past, sit together to decide whether a new family, or additional members of a family, could be admitted into the trade. Would the surrounds allow it. Sometimes hard decisions had to be made, resulting occasionally in quarrels and bad blood. But in all this, there was no alienation with their surrounds. It was never a question of 'trade off' between their own requirements and the sanctity of their surrounds. Their requirements had to be within the harmony that their homes represented.

But now all this had changed. There was a pervasive sense of panic, of time running out, of competition.

What was once their home, was today under some one else's control, and even the limited access they had might be stopped soon. If your home is on fire and all is going to be lost to you, would you not try and 'take out' whatever you could?

By the time we arrived in the village, much of the 'community home' had broken down, and most people had retreated into their own compounds, viewing their neighbours as competitors, as unwanted users of a common 'resource'. The bamboos in the region had also suffered badly and their regeneration was threatened.

The local officials pointed to the havoc wreaked as an example of how local communities were totally incapable of using natural resources in a sustainable manner. They proudly pointed to the 'closed' forests, vast areas forming the traditional home of the tribals, and claimed that but for them, these areas would also have finished. It was, they reiterated, the 'protection' they gave to these remaining forests, that had 'saved' them for more 'productive', 'efficient', and 'scientific' 'management'.

These foresters, in brief, had attempted to 'protect' a home from its inhabitants, thereby alienating them. They had also not recognised that these forests had existed and thrived for millions of years, unfolding human communities who lived in consonance within them.

However, this was not their fault. If anything, they were trying to do their jobs, as defined for them from 'above', as best as they knew.

But the urgent problem was: how to save the bamboos? What

would happen if they stopped regenerating? What would the tribals do then? What impact would it have on the ecosystem?

Some of us were co-opted into the debate. Our 'urban' background, and unique insensitivity, made us easy prey. We were lectured to by the officials and asked to use all our persuasive abilities in convincing the tribals to 'go easy' on the bamboos. There was, of course, good faith all around, but perhaps not much good sense. And very little real experience.

We were all proud of our commitment and confident of our oratory. We called the village together, and convinced them that, for their own good and survival, they must 'ration' their use of bamboo. They must, by implication, ration survival, happiness, even ration the chances their children had for survival. We saw the half empty plates of the boys and girls, and knew that 'rationing' would mean even less food. But we felt that todays frugality would ensure longevity.

A year and a half later we received, out of the blue, an almost illegibly scrawled postcard from one of the tribals. He was frantic, and incoherent. But we got the sense of some impending doom. By then, the village was only a vague memory of a job well done. We had got a lot of mileage from it in cocktails and seminars, but we had moved on to other, and 'bigger', things. We nearly did not respond. But then there was a long weekend ahead, and somebody was willing to drive us there in her car. And so, almost casually, we set out to see what the panic was.

The tribals were angry, heart broken, in despair, and very frightened. They had been told that they could no longer get the bamboos they had been collecting, as the government had given a contract to a paper mill to extract the bamboos from that forest. The

contractors had already started clear felling the area, and in a few weeks the last of the bamboos would disappear down the road, loaded on trucks. A million years of interaction finished in a jiffy.

And what of their frugality, their "rationing", their sacrifices. All of it helped save some of the bamboo so that the paper mill could get a little more.

The local officials were sad, and even resentful, but their orders had come from 'higher up'. They had protested, but to no avail.

The end to this story was not a total tragedy, for if nothing else 'city types' can always meet administrators and politicians, and get stories written in newspapers. All this was done, and a little salvaged, for a short while. But what about the hundreds of other such cases.

How does one ask the populace to protect, or even be gentle with, their surrounds, when they are no longer a part of their home, and must be looked at as objects of utility. Does it not make for better utility from their point of view if they grab whatever they can, as quickly as they can, before someone else takes it away?

The Justifications

When children are denied mothers and fathers, they are called orphans, and if they are lucky, they are lodged in orphanages. It is recognised that orphanages do not replicate parents, and orphans are always considered deprived.

Fortunately no government explicitly propagates the orphaning of a people, whatever the trade-offs, and the relationship between a child and its parents is recognised as inviolable, non-replicable, and not an object of 'utility' and trade-offs.

Should we not, then, think of those whose homes have been violated as orphans, as deprived people, who can never be adequately 'compensated'.

Should not the violation of a home be considered as reprehensible as the orphaning of children? Can 'homes' be considered merely as objects of 'utility', as subjects of 'trade offs'.

But am I overstating the case? Are homes really that important? Do they actually mean so many things? Are they that difficult to re-create?

I cannot, or perhaps do not want to, offer ' arguments' in support of this. I am sure some 'empirically tested hypothesis' can be found which can be arm-twisted to indicate how much people cherish their homes. Perhaps I can then deduce whatever I want from these, using impeccable logic.

Consider that administrators since long have considered threat of transfer a major strategy that politicians use to 'tame' uncooperative officers. But why is it such a potent threat? Especially since an officer is invariably assured his salary, house, peons, vehicle, water, electricity, markets, telephone, and even cinemas & schools. They can plug in effortlessly into the 'infrastructure' that awaits them. Still there is dislocation, the changing of schools for children, the leaving of old friends, the job that the spouse does, the preferred town or city.

Their homes are relatively artificial, easily shifted, but still there is a trauma. So much of a trauma that officers get pressurised to do all sorts of things that are wrong, perhaps dishonest,

and always against public interest, so as not to get transferred. And those who do not oblige, and do get transferred, think of themselves as martyrs, as remarkable men and women who have performed far beyond the call of duty.

Not so long ago there was a major controversy about the Government reserving the right to transfer Chief Justices of High Courts from one court to another. Now these worthies are always assured of going to State Headquarters, or other cities, and are usually at an age when they don't have school going children. Yet it was considered by many of them, and the intelligensia of the country, as a significant interference in the independence of the judiciary.

But tribals, when they are alienated from their homes, have to discover new ways of earning a living, new sources of water, of fuel, of fodder. They have to discover new markets for their wares, and for their needs, and have to seek afresh acceptance into a new social group. They have to build up new linkages, and new relationships. And all the time they have to fight their sense of loss, for if they do not feel a sense of belonging in their home, they will never belong anywhere: not to their community, not to their state, not to their country, and not even to the earth. They will be forced to look at all their surrounds with eyes of 'utility', with opportunism, with an urge to exploit. Like motherless waifs, they will forget how to cherish, how to love, how to enfold in themselves.

Perhaps we, the elite, the planners, the powerful people, are mostly those who 'urbanisation' and 'westernisation' have alienated from our own homes. Our roots have, perhaps, become of the air, waving like antennas, ready to plug into the latest, the fashionable, the superficial.

Perhaps we are so alienated from our own homes, that we have lost all understanding of what home means, and refuse to recognise that others might cherish theirs.

Perhaps we, the homeless, resent those who still have homes.

Or is it that what we consider our 'homes' are secure, because they are portable, and transient, and protected by our status, our connections, our money power, our membership of the ruling elite. And as we perceive no threat, we can't identify with, empathise with, those who are constantly being threatened.

We think of those without security as 'them', while we are 'us', whom no one can touch. And only the shattering of our own 'false security' would perhaps make us sensitive to the plight of these people.

While I was working in Shillong, an officer from Assam related this story to me.

A young Britisher was arrested somewhere in Assam, and lodged in one of the district jails. Apparently this young man was well connected, and a representative of the British Consulate in Calcutta came to see him in jail.

The district jails in much of Assam, as perhaps elsewhere, are medieval in design. This jail had basically one long hall where all the different types of detainees, including the convicted criminals and the non-criminal lunatics, were housed. There were open alcoves, without doors, which served as latrines, and whose smell constantly hung around the compound.

The British official emerged from his meeting, ashen, clutching his handkerchief to his nose. He immediately started

remonstrating with the local officials on the condition of the jail, which he said was not fit to house even animals.

The local jailer, a Bengalee who had in his long years 'seen it all' was very amused and responded. "These jails were made before independence by the British to house Indians. Now just because a Britisher has got jailed, they suddenly seem inhuman?"

Are we, then, like the colonialists who never planned for human beings, or even animals, but for 'them', a category which deserved no consideration. Can we only recognise this when what we do to 'them' gets done to us?

Of Omlettes and Eggs

We are told that 'development' must go on, and of course you can't 'make an omlette without breaking eggs'. But why is it that we are always breaking 'their' eggs in order to make omlettes for 'us'? If we are really sincere, why not for once break 'our' eggs and feed 'them' the resultant omlette ?

Societies are finally governed by moral authority. Laws, governments, and institutions, are only respected and relevant as long as they emanate from a mandate which has some moral basis. Our constant efforts at justifying the prevailing patterns of development have long since lost their legitimacy.

If we are sincere, let us now start from the top. A good beginning can be made in the capital itself.

In 1988, hundreds of people died in Delhi because of a Cholera epidemic. This epidemic was caused because of the unsanitary conditions these people were forced to live in, as their localities did not have proper sewage systems, and potable water was not available.

As opposed to these millions of people, a few thousand people are living is huge bungalows, with an acre or more of lawn, plenty of water and a fleet of sweepers.

Now if 'development' really means that a few must sacrifice for the many, why not shift the millions in these 'trans-Jamuna' unhealthy communes, to the centre of Delhi where they can get good water, civic amenities and have to travel less to get to work? Why not make the 'few' if not sacrifice, at least share, their space with the many ?

Only then, we think, would a State have the moral right to ask its poorer people to also share, or sacrifice. But, perhaps, if the rich were asked to share, there would never be a need to ask the poor to sacrifice.